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ABSTRACT

This study of parent-teacher communications was in response to an administrative inquiry regarding the status of home-school interactions at a suburban Florida middle school. The Parent Communication Survey (PCS) was developed to assess parents' concerns relative to parent-teacher communication (what parents wanted to hear, how they wished to be contacted, and how teachers might improve the quality of their interactions with parents). A total of 86 parents volunteered to complete the PCS. This convenience sample included parents of typically performing students, gifted students, and students with learning disabilities. Data analysis indicated that of the modes of communication listed on the PCS, parents preferred (in descending order) telephone calls home, electronic mail, and notes in the planner. They typically did not wish to be contacted at their workplace regarding school issues. Parents wanted to hear about students' academic progress and concerns, behavioral concerns, social-emotional development, and curricular issues. Parents believed that home-school communications could be improved in the areas of collaboration, consistency, and specificity. (Contains 17 references.) (SM)

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Teacher-Parent Communication: Starting the Year Off Right

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A paper presented at the 43rd Biennial Convocation of the Kappa Delta Pi International Honor Society in Education, November 2001. Orlando, Florida

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Abstract

Communicating with parents is an important but potentially intimidating task for teachers, particularly those who are new to the profession. Understanding the information parents want to hear and identifying the most productive means of interaction will assist educators in establishing effective channels of collaboration with families. In the present study, a parent survey was conducted to determine the climate of home-school communication in a suburban neighborhood in central Florida. The Parent Communication Survey was designed by the author to determine what parents want to hear, how they wish to be contacted and how teachers might improve the quality of their interactions with parents. Eighty-six parents voluntarily completed the instrument. A thematic analysis of the data yielded four topics of primary concern to parents and three areas for improved teacher communication. Preferred methods of contact were also discussed.

Teacher-Parent Communication: Starting the Year Off Right

To effectively instruct all learners, particularly those with exceptional needs, it is essential that educators establish channels of communication that will promote positive partnerships with the families of the children they serve. To encourage teamwork between teachers and parents, it is important for faculty to understand what families want to hear, the forms of interaction they prefer and the caliber of collaboration they desire. By addressing academic, behavioral, social-emotional and curricular issues proactively, while fostering a sense of shared responsibility for problem solving and decision-making, bridges of communication can be built that will bolster beneficial dialogue between school and home.

In response to an administrative inquiry regarding the status of home-school interactions at a suburban middle school in central Florida, the current investigation was initiated. The Parent Communication Survey (PCS) was developed to assess parents' concerns relative to parent-teacher communication (see Figure 1). The present study served as a pilot for the PCS while amassing helpful data on the collaborative climate of this particular population.

Literature Review

Substantive Collaboration

In recent decades many studies have shown the powerful impact parent involvement has on the education of children (Epstein, 1988; Henderson, 1981, 1987, 1988). Students whose parents are actively involved in their education complete their homework more regularly, score better on classroom tests and demonstrate more positive attitudes toward school than students whose parents are less involved (Christenson &

Cleary, 1990). It is no secret that most families and schools desire to increase the quantity and quality of interaction between them, but how is this best accomplished? Above all, parents want to be heard (Pruitt, Wandry & Hollums, 1998). Families desire teachers to listen to their input and their concerns. Too often educators initiate communication with a narrow agenda, which is often focused on a negative problem, and do not allow the parent the opportunity to have a voice. To improve the level of communication between home and school, it is imperative that teachers concentrate on becoming better listeners. By taking a more open-ended approach to communication, teachers and parents will both come away with a more holistic view of the child and how to best meet his or her unique needs at school and at home.

Historically, the parent-teacher exchange has been merely a two-way information exchange (Morningstar, 1999). This approach is no longer sufficient; full-fledged collaboration between home, school and community is necessary to completely understand and meet the needs of the whole child (Epstein, 1995). For such collaboration to occur, all stakeholders must view themselves as team players that contribute equally in problem-solving and decision-making processes (Dettmer, Dyck & Thurston, 2002). Villa (2001) contends that the child and his or her peers have just as much to contribute to the collaborative process as any adult.

Academic issues such as homework are areas of frequent concern for parents, especially if their child has special learning needs (Bursuck, Harris, Epstein, Polloway, Jayanthi & Wissinger, 1999; Jayanthi, Nelson, Sawyer, Bursuck & Epstein, 1995). It is important that teachers communicate homework expectations to the student and the

parent and provide them with strategies to assist in the successful completion of assignments (Epstein, Munk, Bursuck, Polloway & Jayanthi, 1999).

Depending upon the age and particular educational needs of the child, behavioral, social-emotional and curricular concerns might also arise. These concerns may or may not originate with the teacher. It is important that the educator give due consideration to issues that are perceived as problematic by the student or the parent (Pruitt, Wandry & Hollums, 1998).

Means of Communication

Although written communication and telephone contacts remain two dominant styles of interaction between schools and families, traditional methods are being improved and new technologies are on the rise. Rather than just a simple note home, many teachers have found daily dialogue journals to be a tremendous tool for facilitating in-depth communication between home and the classroom (Dodd & Lilly, 1997; Finnegan, 1997; Morningstar, 1999; Williams & Cartledge, 1997). While Internet sources are just making their way into the literature, electronic mail should be considered a potentially powerful tool for interacting with parents in a timely manner (Spurr, 1999).

Method

Participants

Eighty-six parents whose children attend a suburban middle school in central Florida voluntarily completed a home-school communication questionnaire. This convenience sample included parents of typically performing students, gifted students and students with learning disabilities at the sixth, seventh and eighth grade levels. The sample was representative of the school's total population.

Instrument

The researcher designed the Parent Communication Survey (PCS) particularly for use in the present pilot study. Respondents were asked to rank preferred methods of communication and to answer three open-ended questions pertaining to the effectiveness of home-school interactions. Prior to dissemination, colleagues with professional expertise in the area of collaborative communication reviewed the survey for face, content and construct validity.

Data Analysis

Rank order data yielded from the question regarding modes of communication were analyzed and descriptive statistics reported. Free responses generated from the remaining prompts were subjected to thematic analysis.

Results

Preferred Modes of Communication

Of the modes of communication listed on the PCS, phone calls home (41.7%), electronic mail (22.9%) and notes in the planner (17.7%) were parents' three most preferred methods of contact. Parents typically did not wish to be contacted at their workplace regarding school concerns (6.3%). Class websites (5.2%), United States mail (3.1%) and other write-in forms of communication (3.1%) were not highly favored styles of interaction. (See Figure 2).

What Parents Want to Hear

A thematic analysis of responses to open-ended questions on the PCS yielded four major areas of interest to parents: academic progress and concerns, behavioral concerns, social-emotional development and curricular issues.

Seventy-seven of the 86 parents surveyed indicated that their child's progress, or lack thereof, was one of the most important things educators need to communicate to families. While parents felt it was necessary for teachers to communicate areas of deficit, they desired to receive updates regarding their child's successes as well. In situations involving academic difficulty, parents expressed a need for immediate contact so they could be a part of problem-solving process prior to a serious decline in their child's performance. Additionally, many parents requested that teachers offer suggestions that would enable them to support the educational process at home.

Fifty-one of the parents polled also listed behavioral issues as a primary concern. While most parents desired immediate notification in the case of their child's inappropriate conduct, many parents also wished that teachers would also share positive feedback about their child's appropriate actions. Parents especially wanted to know of any changes in their child's attitude and any instances of disrespect toward authority.

In a similar vein, some of the respondents were concerned about their child's social-emotional development. Parents realize that teachers have frequent opportunities to observe peer interactions and can often recognize potential difficulties students might encounter while adjusting to various stages of adolescence. The families surveyed indicated a desire for teachers to share this type of information with them.

The last trend that was noted related to curricular issues. With the increased push for accountability at state and national levels, parents are becoming more concerned with the content that is being presented in their child's classes. Involved families want to support curricular efforts at home to further ensure their child's success on standardized assessments.

What Parents Want from Teachers

An analysis of parent comments as to how home-school communications could be improved yielded three predominant themes: collaboration, consistency and specificity. First, parents regard themselves as key players in their child's education, as they should. To achieve parity in collaborative processes, families expressed a desire to be included in problem-solving and decision-making processes while they are still in the formative stages. A second issue concerned the professional courtesy of following through with commitments to communicate. Parents become very frustrated when they are expecting to receive feedback about their child and it is slow in coming or overlooked altogether. Finally, parents are often aggravated when teachers speak about their child in general terms. They would like teachers to take a personal interest in their child, and they want interactions about their child to be uniquely individual.

Discussion

Limitations

Although the present study generated a wealth of beneficial information, there are certain drawbacks that should be considered. This research was purposive because it targeted one specific school; therefore, the results are unique to the school in question and cannot be generalized to other situations. Furthermore, within the school population, a convenience sample was employed. The 86 parents who chose to respond to the survey were likely parents who are concerned about the status of home-school interactions. Their responses are not necessarily representative of the views of parents who elected not to participate in the study.

Avenues for Further Research

Collaborative communication between schools and families is a topic of great interest to all stakeholders in the educational process. Traditional two-way exchange is no longer sufficient. Researchers need to explore ways to improve and expand conventional methods of interaction. Internet sources, websites and electronic mail are promising means of communication that warrant continued investigation.

Although the findings of this study are specific to the school population surveyed, this author is hopeful that her conclusions were helpful to educators in similar situations. School personnel who are concerned about the status of collaborative communication between parents and teachers are encouraged to replicate the study in their own setting.

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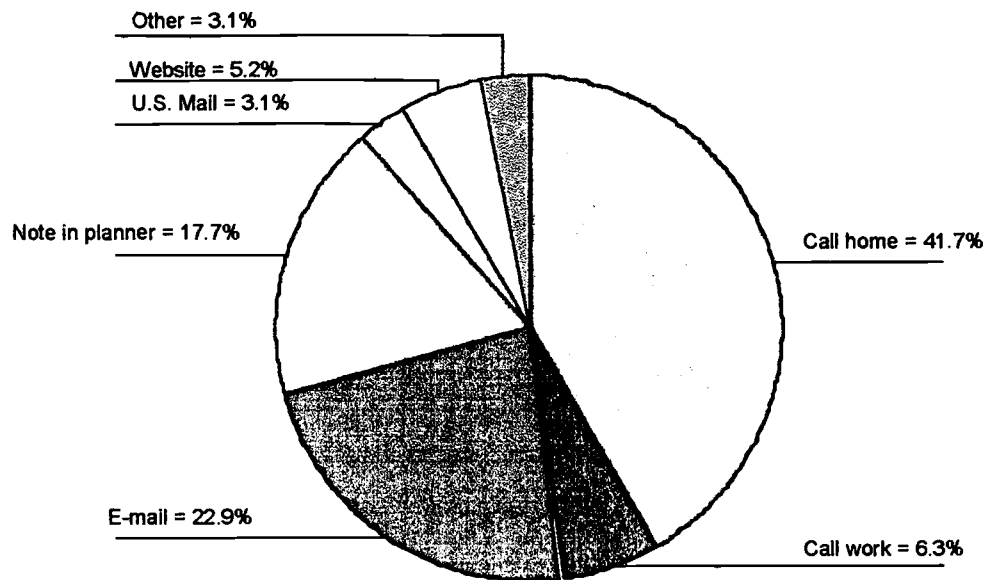
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Figure 1. Family Communication Survey (FCS)

<p><u>Parent Communication Survey</u></p> <p>1. The three (3) most important things that teachers should communicate with parents are:</p> <p>1. _____</p> <p>2. _____</p> <p>3. _____</p> <p>4. Please rank these modes of communication. (1= most preferred method, 8 = least preferred method).</p> <p>_____ Phone call at home</p> <p>_____ Phone call at work</p> <p>_____ E-mail</p> <p>_____ Note in planner</p> <p>_____ U.S. mail</p> <p>_____ Newsletters</p> <p>_____ Class website</p> <p>_____ Other (please specify): _____</p> <p>5. When teachers communicate with me about my child, I wish they would...</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>6. Communication between home and school could be improved by...</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p> <p>_____</p>
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Figure 2. Parents' Preferred Modes of Communication





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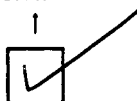
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